

Vandalism

By Peter David Smith

In 1968 I was 15 and I went to summer camp with the Air Training Corps. We were all Air Cadets together and we were permitted to stay at R.A.F. Chivenor in Devon, near the towns of Barnstaple and Ilfracombe.

During our stay there we got up early, made our beds, dressed in uniform and had breakfast in the NAAFI. We were allowed to eat the same food the R.A.F. men ate: Egg, bacon, fried bread, chips, baked beans and tinned tomatoes.

We fell in, stood to attention, marched around, were shown various aircraft and were permitted to ride in the passenger seat of a glider. On another day it was the passenger seat of a *de Havilland Canada DHC-1 Chipmunk* training plane. The glider ride was better than the Chipmunk because the passenger seat in the glider was way up front in the actual nose of the glider's structure, so the view was amazing. With all of the glider behind us, and nothing but empty sky in front of us, it was like being a bird, or a superhero, flying without the plane.

Seeing Devon from the air at age 15. Absolutely wonderful and exciting!

The summer camp experience was one of the best things I had ever known in the first 15 years of my life but there was one bad day.

There was a day when we were permitted to go out of the camp and wander the countryside. We wandered around randomly, our corporal making the decisions to go left or right or whichever way down country lanes and over fields.

Then we came to the railway.

The 1960s had seen the shutting down of many railway lines in the South West of England and the closing of many stations.

In Devon there had been a line owned by the Barnstaple and Ilfracombe Railway Company. We happened upon one of their stations and the corporal and some of the bigger boys found a way in. I wasn't sure whether they had broken the lock or whether the door was just open.

I didn't want go in to the deserted railway station. Something seemed very wrong but all of the bigger boys were going in.

I was standing at the threshold of the door saying "Are we allowed in? What is this place?"

The other boys were assuring me that it was "alright".

I liked the look of all the old fashioned little cardboard railway tickets which were in neat little boxes on the interior wall of the little station building.

Then the bigger boys started grabbing handfuls of tickets and throwing them around chaotically and laughing. I said “Why are you doing that? You’re making a mess! We’ll get into trouble!” Then they laughed at me as if I was the one being stupid.

The boys grabbed lots of tickets and ran out, across the fields, throwing clouds of tickets up in the air like confetti to fall strewn upon bushy foliage and tussocks of grass, spoiling the countryside and telling anybody else who passed along the same fields and footpaths that some rough vandal boys from Surrey A.T.C. had been there and done that.

Idiots!!!

I simply couldn’t understand why they had done that.

A sort of destructive mania seemed to take hold of them. The corporal worst of the lot. I already knew he wasn’t a very nice sort of person because of the dirty songs about firing cannon balls up inside of women and all the dirty things like that he would lead all the boys in singing as we marched along. Nevertheless, I was still shocked by the spontaneous eruption of vandalism.

It made me realise why boys in uniform needed to be trained to behave in an orderly manner, with that kind of mad violence inside of them.

As I grew up I thought of that nasty day of vandalism and tried to get my head round how the relationship works between organised structural military behaviour and the chaos which is there at the core of the boys’ souls, waiting to be let loose. Boys and men, with a kind of gunpowder in their bellies, waiting for the fuse to be lit.

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